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# Where the NSC Staff Failed

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## Not Its Power, But Its Weakness

The foreign policy mistakes that surround the sale of arms to Iran have been widely blamed on the excessive power of the National Security Council staff.

My view, perhaps unorthodox, is that the exact opposite is true. The root cause of the United States' foreign policy difficulties is not the strength but the weakness of the national security adviser's staff. It has singularly failed to perform what should be its principal task: to develop realistic options for the consideration of the president and his principal advisers. To be sure, the NSC staff has engaged in occasional acts of operational bravado. But these acts have proved so damaging precisely because of the absence of a system for setting realistic objectives and establishing a relationship between ends and means.

This becomes clear when one considers that the sale of arms to Iran was not an isolated event. In the long term, the events surrounding the Reykjavik summit may prove to have been more damaging than Iran. At Reykjavik—as on Iran—the president lacked a reasoned statement of options and consequences. The failure at Reykjavik was not the predominance of the NSC staff but the administration's inability to develop a strategy that related diplomacy, military policy and arms control policy to a coherent national purpose.

The Tower Commission, recently established to look into the proper role for the NSC staff, should therefore interpret its charter to include the gamut of national security policy decision-making.

In Greek mythology the gods sometimes punished man by fulfilling his wishes too completely. In its sixth year the Reagan administration is paying the price for the seeming effortlessness and excessive self-confidence by which its considerable successes have been achieved. President Reagan's extraordinary instinct, his vast popularity and the temporary Soviet weakness caused by a succession of aged leaders made unnecessary the shakedown of procedures and personnel that a crisis usually imposes early in a presidential term. As a result, exorbitant reliance has been placed by his subordinates on President Reagan's persuasive skills. They have acted on the apparent belief that the major challenge to American statesmanship is the public presentation of its decisions and not their quality.

Counting on the safety net of the president's hold on the American public, his advisers felt secure in pursuing their clashing preferences with a single-mindedness unusual even by the not exactly gentle standards of Washington. "Nothing ever gets settled in this town," said Secretary of State George Shultz to the House Foreign Relations Committee. "It is a seething debating society in which the debate never stops, nobody ever gives up, including me." Policy thereby becomes fragmented into a series of ad hoc decisions driven by immediate problems or negotiating deadlines. Spurious compromises emerge, permitting each department or agency either to pursue its own preference or withdraw into sullen dissociation until the next occasion for battle. The State Department's relentless skill in edging toward negotiating positions never fully made explicit confronts the Defense Department's uncanny proclivity to block progress by means of unacceptable proposals. But the result has been confusion and incoherence more often than a long-range strategy. Nor was the NSC staff sufficiently subtle to distill a realistic strategy from the president's idealistic aspiration to abolish nuclear weapons or his compassionate desire to pay for the release of hostages. In fact, it seems that on Iran the NSC staff mistook a presidential objective for a directive; rather than helping establish priorities, the NSC staff became one of the players.

In the end, the only player who turned out to have no safety net was Ronald Reagan. I can think of no recent president so abandoned by his associates in his hour of crisis. He was alone on the parapet.

Moreover, whatever the failings of the NSC staff, departmental abdication bears a share of the blame. In 1985, the State and Defense departments and the CIA clearly knew that weapons were being shipped to Iran. It is difficult to believe that they could not have learned that something similar was going on in 1986 had they chosen to inform themselves. After all, hundreds of tons of equipment can hardly be moved from depots across the oceans without somebody's becoming aware of it. In such circumstances, the president is entitled to assume that Cabinet members who do not resign will cooperate in the implementation of his policy and defend his decisions when necessary.

In the case of Iran, not only decision-making but implementation seems to have broken down. What, for example, happened to the 40 Committee representing all concerned agencies, which in previous administrations supervised clandestine operations?

The objective of improving relations with Iran is surely valid given Iran's geopolitical importance. But the timing is open to question. What analysis or intelligence buttressed the belief in the existence of a moderate faction in Tehran? Why was it thought that supplying arms would help the moderate faction when their use was bound to serve radical ends? Why was a senior American sent to Tehran without an assurance of whom he would meet or of an agenda for discussion? How can one contribute to ending a war on an equitable basis by supplying arms to the side that has the upper hand and whose victory would undermine all moderate forces in the Moslem world? Who could possibly believe that the sale of hundreds of tons of equipment could be kept secret, especially as it involved at least three arms dealers of different nationalities? And did anyone—proponents or opponents of the scheme—describe to the president the damage that would result to U.S. credibility worldwide and especially in the Persian/Arabian Gulf, as well as the impact on oil prices, from the inevitable disclosure that the United States had acted in flat contradiction of its own passionately declared antiterrorism policy?

It is clear that the advocates of the Iran arms sale gave at best incomplete answers to these questions. But did the opponents present a systematic rebuttal? Did their claim of not being fully informed reflect a White House decision to exclude them or a departmental decision to adopt a posture of protective ignorance. Or both? How could they be ignorant if they had access to the full range of intelligence? If intelligence was withheld from Cabinet members, we face a breakdown of the system. If, however, the ignorance was self-imposed, the president faces a collapse of discipline and cohesiveness. The Tower Commission must get to the bottom of these issues if it is to contribute to improving national policy.

Nor will the commission be able to contribute to improving national security decision-making if it does not examine such cases as the Reykjavik summit. Was any consideration given to the danger that announcing a summit in such close proximity to the Daniloff-Zakharov

swap had to appear as an extortion—above all to the Kremlin? What tempted Mikhail Gorbachev into the unprecedented and disdainful step of presenting a sweeping agenda without advance notification and demand that it be negotiated on the spot? What induced the U.S. delegation to go along rather than confine itself to asking questions and setting out a work schedule leading to an eventual subsequent summit? By what process did the numbers and concepts discussed at Reykjavik emerge? Why were the principally affected allies not consulted?

Indeed, Reykjavik, because it culminated years of effort, worries me even more than Iran, which represented a limited misjudgment. At Reykjavik, the Soviets took advantage of the weakness of the American decision-making process by suddenly agreeing to American positions put forward over the years primarily to paper over departmental differences. For example, did the Defense Department representative acquiesce in the Reykjavik agenda because of its merit or because he assumed that the more sweeping the schemes the more likely they were to be aborted by implementing negotiations over verification?

An unintended result of the decision early in the Reagan administration to give the dominant role in policy formulation to the departments has been to exalt the operational role of the NSC staff at the expense of long-range national policy. It has produced a succession of NSC advisers who lacked either strength or the full confidence of the president (William Clark excepted). It has tempted the NSC staff into conducting special presidential missions no one else was eager to undertake.

A fundamental need, therefore, is to strengthen the quality of the NSC staff, to focus its work on defining priorities and options and give it the authority to raise issues beyond what the various departments put forward. Department heads, no matter how dedicated, cannot avoid identifying sound national policy with the preferences of their bureaucracies. These preferences are often valid; but under the pressure of events the urgent generally has priority over the important.

The NSC staff should not as a general rule conduct day-to-day operations involving other nations. This is especially the case with activities that go beyond the establishment of a channel for diplomatic communication. Clandestine operations, because of their potential for embarrassment, require a significant White House role in their design; for the same reason, the NSC staff should stay far away from their execution.

This issue is often wrongly put in terms of departmental prerogatives. But any presidential appointee who insists on his advice as a right has already lost the bureaucratic battle. The real bond between the president and his Cabinet members is intangible; it depends on personal confidence, not on an organization chart. Confidence cannot be commanded, much less extorted by power plays, and prerogatives will not last if they result from pressure.

Like all general administrative rules, the exclusion of the NSC staff from operations should not be pushed too far. In the end the president must be free to use those instruments with which he feels most comfortable. There are some missions in which a presidential emissary can operate more flexibly and with greater authority and discretion than a departmental representative: sensitive talks with the Soviets have, in my view, long suffered from the absence of such a mechanism.

In the end there is no substitute for presidential involvement in decision-making. Limiting his role to ratifying a consensus of his subordinates is likely to evoke the most self-centered reactions at the cost of a sense of long-term direction.

The recent crises in U.S. foreign policy have occurred at a moment when the U.S. bargaining position remains strong; with rapid remedial measures an opportunity for major achievement still lies before the United States.